

The Sign of the Serpent is the final installment of The Revelations Saga. As the prophecy is about to be fulfilled, a sense of terror settles over the kingdom. Will the world of mankind come to an end?

The Sign of the Serpent

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The Sign of the Serpent

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The Sign of the Serpent

Part III of The Revelations Saga

Jan Visser

Prologue

Olbo sat with his back against the rock, his gaze resting on the skull in his lap. Soft light radiated from the crystal, shrouding it in a thin, bluish haze. It was the only source of light in the underground caverns, and when he looked up, he could see its faint glow reflected in the eyes of the twins.

They were watching him. They followed his every move.

Olbo stared into the crystal again, his eyes feverish and his face flushed. He wasn't sure, but it seemed to him as if the skulls were changing, as if they were opening up to him in a way they never had before. It was almost as if they were coming alive. He swallowed hard. Was this even possible? Or had he finally gone insane?

A sudden, pulsating pain drove through his head, pounding like a hammer, and he closed his eyes and winced. Images flashed through his mind, images of fire and destruction and of a terrible darkness that sucked the light out of everything alive. He tried to block it out but found he couldn't. It was as if he was right in the middle of it all, the flames scorching his skin and the darkness pressing upon him like a terrible weight. He felt a surge of panic. It was getting worse! Could it really be his frightened imagination that produced such vivid hallucinations? Or were these images real?

Then the pain ebbed away.

Olbo took a few deep breaths, and as he recovered, he became aware that the twins were still staring at him. Their faces glowed with excitement. For a moment, he was sure that they had somehow been able to see what he had seen and feel what he had felt, but then he discarded the idea. How could they?

His fingers trembled as he opened the sealskin bag at his side. He took out the other skulls, handling them carefully and neatly arranging all six of them in a half circle at his feet. Their hollow eyes stared back at him.

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And despite the fact that these eyes were cold and dead, they somehow radiated an enormous power.

Olbo shivered.

He remembered how he had yearned to get his hands on the skulls, yearned to wield the force that had been locked inside for all these years. But he realized now that he had underestimated that force. What if he couldn't control it? It was almost as if the skulls had a will of their own.

He wondered how he could have misjudged them so badly. After all, he had guarded one of them for several years. Perhaps it was because they were together now, he reflected. It was as if they fed off each other, as if they were components of something larger. And it wasn't just that they were somehow linked, that they could communicate, even over vast distances. No. This was something far deeper.

A drop of cold sweat ran down his cheek. It fell to the floor with a splash that was clearly audible in the dark silence of the caverns.

Olbo flinched at the sound.

Sometimes, he was certain that he felt the presence of an entity, something that seemed to feed on the skulls' energy. He wasn't sure what to make of it, but it made him terribly afraid. And there were moments when he considered getting rid of them. But he knew full well that he couldn't. He needed them to get a sense of what was going on in the world above. If it weren't for the skulls, he wouldn't even have known that Schlemba was still alive.

He closed his eyes and pondered the things he had seen. Schlemba had translated the sacred scrolls, Olbo was sure of it. And then the Attarians had set out to find the missing crystals, hoping to protect themselves against the coming darkness. He had considered looking for the missing skulls himself, but he had decided against it. Even if he *did* find them, what good would it do? Now that he was experiencing the true power contained in the crystals, he was becoming more and more convinced that he could never wield it. Nobody could.

Not even Schlemba....

No, he had made up his mind. The darkness was near. The Beast could not be stopped. The only chance of survival was by hiding underground, and even that, he knew, was a small chance at best.

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Pain seared through his head again, a throbbing pain that quickly grew in intensity. The images returned in full force. There were flames, hot, scorching flames, and a profound, pulsating darkness that closed in on him from all sides. It felt more real than ever before.

He gritted his teeth. He realized that he was going to lose consciousness again, and from the corner of his eye, he saw the twins shift their weight in apparent anticipation.

“Do not touch them,” he managed to whisper.

Then his mind slipped away.

As Olbo slumped against the rock, the twins crawled closer, their feverish eyes fixed on the glowing crystals at his feet.

Chapter 1

The sun was sinking below the horizon when the riders reached the northern edge of the Larxwoods. Since their departure from Persis earlier that day, they had ridden without a single pause, eager to cover as much distance as possible before dark. Now Pykon pulled at the reins, and his mount came to a sliding halt.

When Pykon jumped out of the saddle, his boots crunched in the freshly fallen snow. "Let's set up camp while there's still light," the young commander said.

Schlemba, Foca, Jarud, and the other thirteen riders who made up the search party dismounted and started unpacking their gear.

Foca gave Schlemba a tired but satisfied smile. "Our first ride in a year," she said. "I know I'll be sore tomorrow."

Schlemba didn't respond. She studied his gaunt face. "How about you?" she said. "Are you all right?"

He took a long gulp from his flask. "What do you think?" he wheezed. "I ride like a sack of wheat, remember?"

Foca laughed, and he managed a faint grin. "Don't worry," he said, "I will soon feel a lot better now that I have solid ground under my feet." He straightened his back and gasped in agony. "Or maybe I won't," he moaned.

Foca chuckled.

They set up their tents, struggling to force the pegs into the frozen soil. Foca glanced over her shoulder when she heard Stepper come up behind her, and she laughed when she saw his face. From his snout to his ears, he was covered with powdery snow. The steppehound gave a short, excited bark, wagging his tail. Then he stuck his head into the white

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blanket again, hunting for what seemed to be an extremely interesting scent.

“Don’t let your nose freeze off, Stepper,” Schlemba said drily.

Foca grinned. “Come,” she said. “Let’s water the horses.”

They walked toward the creek that meandered through the frost-covered vegetation. There was a layer of ice at the water’s edge, and when they stepped on it, it broke with a series of loud cracks. The sound spooked the horses. It took some coaxing before the animals dared step into the stream.

Schlemba stroked his horse’s flank to calm her. The mare’s sweat evaporated into steamy clouds that rose up in the cold evening air. As he looked around, he realized that he had been here before, almost at this exact same spot.

“This is where we camped,” he said, somewhat surprised. “Our first stop when...” He hesitated, looking embarrassed. The memories of his deceit still hurt, like a wound that had never completely healed. “When we went after Timba,” he finished, looking down at his hands.

Foca sighed. “It seems like such a long time ago.”

He nodded. “So much has happened since then. Sometimes I can hardly believe it.”

They were silent for a while, lost in their own thoughts. Two of the men stood with their horses downstream, but the others were all back at the camp, gathering around a fire. Apart from the soft murmur of the creek, it was very quiet out here.

Foca looked up at the skies in the south. Shooting stars rained down in droves, leaving brief trails across the darkening background. Some of them seemed quite big. A few years ago, she would have marveled at the sight, but now it filled her with dread. She wondered where those burning rocks would land, and whether there were any people there, people like them, who, at this very moment, were running around in terror and fighting for their lives. She swallowed hard.

“There are so many,” she said softly. “Will it ever stop?”

Schlemba followed her gaze. “I’m afraid it will get a lot worse,” he said.

She was troubled to see the hopelessness in his eyes. She knew that he didn’t think there was much of a chance that they would succeed in their

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mission. And even if they *did* find the skulls, then what was he supposed to do? He had told her that he didn't believe that he could control the terrible power the crystals contained. So would it even matter?

She thought about the prophecy again. *'There is nothing you can do to stop your fate,'* was what it said. Was it true then? Was there nothing they could do? Absolutely nothing?

Foca clenched her jaws. No! She wouldn't accept it. She reminded herself of how Schlemba had changed the course of the comet, how he had saved them all from a certain death, and she couldn't believe that it had all been in vain. How could he have saved them then, only to be helpless now? Somehow, that didn't make sense.

She glanced at him again. His gaze was distant, pointed at the heavens. She knew what his response would be if she brought this up. *'Destiny doesn't have to make sense,'* was what he always said. *'Things don't happen for a reason. They just happen.'* And he was right, of course. There was no higher purpose. And yet, a small part of her refused to accept it, refused to accept that everything they had been through so far had been in vain.

The crunching sound of boots in the snow came from their right, and when she looked up, she saw Pykon approach from the brush. Judging by his expression, he was pleased with the way things were going. She couldn't help admiring him for his optimism, and she thought he bore his newfound responsibilities well.

"I'm glad to see you can still walk, Schlemba," Pykon said cheerfully. He gave the Arrannak a boyish grin. "Although waddling like a duck may not qualify as walking, of course."

Schlemba grinned sheepishly.

Pykon winked at Foca. "Then again, the way you sit your horse doesn't exactly qualify as riding either," he continued. "But hey, as long as you don't fall off, it's fine with me."

He slapped Schlemba on the shoulder. "I'm just teasing you, my friend. Are you all right? We'll need you back in the saddle tomorrow."

Schlemba nodded. "Of course."

"You did well today, both of you," Pykon said. "We covered a lot of ground. And if the trails don't get worse than this, we might be able to get to our destination before noon, tomorrow."

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He sucked in a deep breath of winter air and clapped his hands together contentedly. “Anyway,” he said as he started to turn, “I just wanted to check if you were all right. You should come to the fire and get something to eat. And then you should rest. We’re leaving at dawn.”

They walked back to the camp together and joined the others around the fire. The men were chewing on strips of beef and chunks of dried fruit. Although some of them joked and laughed, the mood was generally subdued. The importance of the mission seemed to weigh heavily upon their shoulders, suppressing their excitement about being on the move.

Foca sat with her arms wrapped around her legs and her chin resting on her knees, pretending to stare into the flames but throwing guarded glances at Jarud. The boy had been with the group that had rescued her from Arrannak, and she had grown very fond of him. He was about her age, yet she had noticed that the others treated him with a lot of respect. Jarud wasn’t exactly handsome, but the deep scars that ran across his face gave him something wild and mysterious. She felt drawn to him in a way she had never experienced before, and the feeling confused her. It wasn’t at all like what she felt for Schlemba.

Jarud caught one of her glances, and Foca quickly lowered her gaze. “Are you all right?” he said. “You look tired.”

She nodded. “Just a bit sore from the ride.”

“It still beats bobbing on the ocean on a rickety raft,” he said, referring to their journey back from the island.

“It does,” she agreed, offering him a warm smile.

Jarud looked down, suddenly uncomfortable, and Foca suppressed a chuckle. She found it funny how shy he was, how uneasy around girls. Even in the gloom she could see that his cheeks had turned a darker shade.

As if to divert her attention, Jarud grabbed a log and threw it into the fire. It sent sparks flying in all directions, and Schlemba yelped as one of them landed on his coat and nearly set it ablaze. Jarud apologized but couldn’t help grinning, and when Foca met his gaze, they both laughed.

The incident seemed to bring the men back to life. One of them, a tall man called Mutu, got up to stretch his legs and said, “It sure feels good to be in these woods again. I used to hunt chipas here, when I was a boy. Good memories.”

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The others grunted in agreement, but Schlemba frowned. “You hunted chipas? You mean you killed them?”

Mutu gave Schlemba a cautious look. The Arrannak’s affection for the little creatures was widely known, and the tale of how he had risked his life to save Timmo’s little tracker still went through the taverns. “Well, I sold some of them to trackers in Mensis,” he said tactfully.

“But you killed the others,” Schlemba said.

“Well, yes,” Mutu admitted. “I mean, they’re just animals aren’t they? Why would they be any different from rats?” He looked around for help, but the others avoided his gaze.

Romnus decided to change the subject and said, “Say, Schlemba, what will you do when we get to the valley? I mean, how will we find the skulls? I’ve heard they are somehow connected, and that you can use the one you’re carrying to find the others. But I guess that’s just a tall tale, right?”

Schlemba shrugged. He realized that they were all looking at him now. “I might be able to sense them when we’re close, but we’ll have to see. It depends on a lot of things.”

Romnus frowned. “So it’s true then,” he said. “They *are* connected. But you can’t sense them now?”

Schlemba shook his head. “It’s still quite far.”

Romnus continued to stare at him, apparently expecting more, but Schlemba avoided the man’s gaze. He was relieved when Pykon started passing around their daily ration of ale, taking their mind off the subject.

As she drank her ale, Foca glanced at Schlemba. She could tell that he was uncomfortable discussing the mission, and she could understand why. What could he say? That he considered this whole thing a waste of time?

She put down her goblet and walked to the edge of the camp to look out over the plains. It was quiet here. The dark skies were lined with streaks of fire. She let the breeze play with her hair and breathed in deeply, her thoughts going out to those they had left behind in Persis. If a large meteor struck the city tonight—or tomorrow perhaps, or the following day—everyone she loved would be killed. They would be killed whether the skulls were found or not. *Destiny doesn’t have a purpose*, Schlemba would say. Bad luck. But was it all a matter of luck?

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Was it really? What about the darkness? In the prophecy, it was called the Beast, after all, which seemed to suggest that it was a living thing. Was it looking down upon her, considering whether it would kill her right now or let her live to see another day?

She pondered this for a while. The thought was frightening, but somehow it was appealing as well. If the Beast, whatever it was, had a will, then perhaps it could be persuaded to leave them alone.

She remembered a heated discussion between Schlemba and Yuma about the sungod. Yuma had been very agitated. He had insisted that the gods were living beings, much like humans, and she now thought she understood why this was so important to him. If the gods were like humans, then at least you might have some control over them. You could bring them offerings and try to get them on your side. She didn't actually think that he was right, but of course there was no way to tell. There was no proof, either way. So what if they *were* like humans? And what if the Beast was a living entity as well, an evil god, perhaps, maybe some kind of demon? Could it be appeased?

A knot exploded in the fire, jerking her out of her musings, and she looked up at the skies once more. The darkness, whatever it was, was out there somewhere; Schlemba had even shown her where it was. But no matter how hard she strained her eyes, she could see nothing but stars.

—(—

They were up before dawn and wolfed down their breakfast. Then they hurriedly broke camp. Pykon led them through the woods along a small path that roughly followed the stream and eventually brought them to the shores of Baltlake. The lake had receded somewhat since they had last seen it, but it was still almost twice its normal size. The jagged remnants of walls rose up from the surface where once a village had stood. A thin sheet of ice had formed at the shores.

They started to follow the outer edges of the lake, the sunlight glimmering on the surface. Foca was lost in thought, barely aware of her surroundings, until she was alarmed by a commotion at the front of the group. She looked toward the lake to see the carcass of a strange, plump animal, some 500 or 600 feet from the shore. At first, she thought it

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looked like a giant slug. But the closer they came, the larger the cadaver appeared to be.

“May the sungod take me,” Pykon said. “It’s a whale!”

“That’s not a whale,” Romnus said. “It hasn’t got any fins.”

“Maybe they fell off as it decomposed,” Pykon said.

Romnus shook his head.

“Then what is it?”

They halted and stared at the carcass in silence, reluctant to get any closer. The lake seemed shallow enough to reach the animal and inspect it, but even from here the smell was unbearable.

“I’ve never seen anything this big in the lake,” Jarud said.

“I haven’t either,” Pykon agreed. “It must have been left here by the flood and somehow survived.”

“Well it’s dead now,” Romnus said dryly.

They spurred their horses to a gallop and moved away from the lake, heading for the mountains. The flood had clearly left its marks here. Rocks and trees lay scattered around, and there were deep gullies, cut into the soil by powerful streams. To Foca’s surprise, the vegetation was already reclaiming the land. She realized that the scars that were left by the disaster would soon be covered forever, reducing the event to little more than a memory. In a few hundred years, people might even question whether the flood had actually taken place. They might think it nothing but a myth, similar to the one they told about the giants. The thought made her feel disheartened. If people forgot so quickly, how could anyone ever learn from the past? If anyone survived the coming darkness, would their descendants even remember what had happened? Would they be prepared when the darkness returned? Because it would.

She looked up and pulled at the reins when Pykon signaled them to halt. They had climbed a long, steep slope and had come to the snow-covered rim, and now Pykon nodded to the valley that stretched out before them.

“This is it,” he said.

Foca looked down. The valley was about ten thousand feet wide and thirty thousand feet long. Wild torrents rushed down the slopes toward a larger stream that cut the entire area in half. The afternoon sun glittered on the surface of the water, making her blink. Debris was strewn across

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the lower parts of the valley, and one of the slopes had collapsed, leaving a shallow ridge of rocks and dirt. A muddy lake had formed behind this ridge, and a herd of tarim grazed at its shores. Higher up the slopes stood a few farm houses, but there was no trace of smoke or any other sign that the houses were inhabited.

“How can we be sure they are here?” a man called Yunus said.

“This is where the boy’s family lived,” Pykon replied. “The farmers here aren’t exactly known for venturing out of the valley, so it’s unlikely the boy found the skull somewhere else.”

Jarud whistled through his teeth. “Still, this is a lot of land to cover. It would help if we had some idea where to start. Do we know where the boy lived?”

Pykon shook his head. He took a swig of water. “But we’ll find out soon. If we can find someone alive, that is.”

“What about the Arrannak?” Yunus said. “Shouldn’t he be able to sense them by now?”

They all turned to Schlemba, who sat slouched in the saddle, breathing heavily and looking exhausted. “Well?” Pykon said. “Can you sense anything?”

Schlemba gazed into the distance. He seemed oblivious to the conversation, his mind somewhere else. His hand rested on the pouch where he kept his crystal, and his long tongue nervously licked his face.

“Schlemba?” Pykon said. “Are you all right?”

Schlemba jumped. “What?” He withdrew his hand from the pouch, as if the contents had suddenly caught fire.

“I said, are you all right?”

Schlemba nodded. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

“We were wondering if you can you sense anything yet,” Pykon said.

Schlemba swallowed. “I...I don’t know. I...” He shook his head. “No, I’m afraid I can’t.”

Pykon gave him a curious look. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Schlemba nodded again. “Yes. I was lost in thought, that’s all.”

Pykon shook his head. He turned to the slopes that lay before them, and as he moved a hand over the stubble on his chin, he sighed. “It *is* a lot of land to cover, isn’t it? Well then, let’s see if we can find someone.”

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They crossed the width of the valley, then roughly followed the stream through its entire length, but with no success. The few farm houses they came across were deserted and seemed to have been so for quite a while. When darkness set in, they rode back down to the river and set up camp.

That night, the mood was glum. Searching the valley suddenly seemed an impossible task, and they weren't even sure if the skulls were actually here. Pykon decided to tackle the western slopes first, starting from the north and working their way to the base of the mountain. He doled out an extra ration of ale to lift their spirits.

As they sipped their drinks, they stared into the fire, thinking about Persis. The city suddenly seemed very far away. Pykon was just about to suggest turning in to get some sleep when one of the men jumped up and cried, "Look!"

They followed his gaze and saw a large fireball streak across the northern skies. Jarud gasped. "It looks like it went straight to Persis!"

Pykon grabbed one of the older men by the arm. "Tammus, you've got a better sense of direction than any of us," he said. "Do you think it was headed for Persis?"

"It's hard to tell," Tammus said. "I looked like it was, but that still doesn't mean anything. I can't judge the distance."

"What if it struck?" someone said. "This one was huge."

They fell silent, staring at the northern skies, but there was nothing to see but the occasional shooting star. All around them it was dark and quiet.

When Pykon finally sat down by the fire again, his face was pale and grim. "We'll find them," he said. "We'll find those damned skulls and bring them back, if it's the last thing we ever do."

"It may well *be* the last thing," Romnus grunted.

Foca looked at Schlemba, hoping to catch his eye, hoping that he would give her a reassuring smile. But instead she saw how distraught he was. When he caught her stare, he flinched and looked away. Then he got up and disappeared into his tent.

"Schlemba?" she called after him.

He didn't answer. Her heart sank, and she hid her face behind her hands and sobbed.

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Olik was standing by the window when he caught sight of the fireball. “Great gods,” he gasped. He watched the trail of fire disappear into the distance. There was a bright flash, followed by a moment of silence, and then he could hear the soft thud of a faraway explosion.

Yoni and Atrana rose and gave each other a worried look. “What happened?” Atrana said.

Olik rested his hands on the windowsill and leaned out to study the darkening horizon. “A fireball,” he said. “It came down somewhere in the Northwoods.”

He was silent for a while, searching the heavens, his heart thumping in his chest. The memories of the meteor storm that had pounded Persis still haunted him in his dreams. It had killed hundreds and destroyed large sections of the city. The rubble still hadn’t been cleared from the streets.

“I haven’t seen anything this big since the storm,” he said.

“Let’s hope there is only one,” Atrana said. “We’ve got enough problems as it is.” She demonstratively dropped the parchment she had been holding on the table.

Olik walked back to the table and sank in his chair. He picked up the parchment and read it for a third time. It was a message from Subor. It had arrived just before dusk. Terrek Kuhn’s forces had surrounded the city of Gulis, it read, and if the siege wasn’t broken soon, defeat would only be a matter of time. Unlike Persis, Gulis didn’t have the luxury of a port, and supplies were running out quickly.

He skipped the next part and stared at Subor’s name, scribbled at the bottom.

Atrana sighed and said, “I don’t think it would be wise to go.”

Olik frowned. “We can’t just ignore this.”

“We can’t,” Yoni agreed. “If Gulis falls, Persis will soon follow. The only way to save the kingdom is to forge an alliance. It’s what we have tried to achieve all along.”

“But what if we’re gone and the Kuhndars return?” Atrana objected. “We can barely defend the city as it is.”

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“That’s why we should act quickly,” Olik said. “Strike them now, before they move west again. You know they will, eventually.”

Atrana shook her head. “It’s too risky.”

“What do the scouts say?” Yoni wanted to know.

When Olik opened his mouth to reply, the door was opened with force, and Mansur stormed into the room. He was breathing heavily.

“I was at the south gate,” the stocky commander said. “I would have been here sooner, but there was some trouble, and—”

He fell silent as Olik showed him the parchment. Mansur took it and started to read, a deepening frown creasing his forehead. “Are you sure Subor wrote this?” he said.

“It’s his handwriting,” Olik said. “And the seal seemed genuine enough.”

Mansur shook his head and snorted. “Gulis must be in deep trouble if Subor is asking for help.”

Olik nodded. “We wanted to hear your opinion before bringing the issue to the nobles.”

Mansur tossed the parchment to the table with a grunt. “Do we have a choice? Should we let Terrek Kuhn destroy Gulis and slaughter everyone inside? He won’t stop there, you know. He’ll be back. If we don’t fight him now—”

“Subor says he will swear allegiance to the throne,” Atrana interjected. “Do you believe him?”

Mansur looked at her. “Subor may have his faults, but he’s not a liar. If that’s what he says he’ll do, he’ll do it.”

“Listen, Atrana,” Olik said, “this is our chance to restore the kingdom. It’s risky, I agree. But we have to take this opportunity. We may not get another one.”

Mansur nodded in agreement. “I can understand that you’re afraid to leave Persis, Atrana,” he said. “But the danger may not be as grave as you think. You forget that Terrek can only reach the city across the plains, and that he will be hemmed in by the mountain ranges. If he does decide to move west, we’ll simply intercept him.”

Atrana pondered this for a moment. She realized that Mansur was right, but he forgot to mention a significant problem. “Without horses,

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we'll have little chance against the Kuhndars if we have fight them on the plains," she observed.

"Perhaps," Mansur said. "But what I'm saying is that he can't get to the city without running into *us*. And we don't *have* to fight him, unless we choose to. We can also retreat."

Atrana walked to the low table in the corner of the room and studied the map that was draped across it, a map large enough to cover the entire surface. She sighed. If only they had been able to travel on horseback. But the siege had reduced the number of horses to less than twenty, and some of them were still foals. Gulis had never looked as far away as it did now.

Mansur said, "Let's teach Terrek a lesson, Atrana. What do you say? The swine has it coming."

She looked up at him, then stared at the map again, licking her lips. Finally, she nodded. "All right then. Let's do it."

Mansur grinned. "Good!"

"We've got no time to lose," Olik said. "When can we be ready? By noon tomorrow?"

Mansur shrugged. "If we take as little as possible, yes. And I suggest that's what we do. We should travel light."

Olik nodded. "Now all we have to do is find a way to convince the Persian nobles."

"They'll never agree," Atrana said. "They'll argue that Subor is a traitor, that we should let him rot."

Mansur snorted. "We don't need their approval. Not if we go without them."

"I agree," Olik said. "We'll take our own men and leave the Persian guard behind. Those who want to join us are welcome."

Atrana nodded.

"We should notify Pykon," Yoni said.

They all looked at her.

"We promised to send him extra men," Yoni explained. "But that will have to wait. Besides, they need to know what's going on."

"Let's send Timmo," Mansur blurted.

Olik frowned. "Old Timmo? I don't know, Mansur. He hasn't been his usual self since we found him."

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“It might do him good, actually,” Yoni said. “I think this is exactly what he needs, an assignment. Something to make him feel he’s still important. And we could send Yari along to keep an eye on him. That will solve another problem, because I’m sure Yari will insist on joining the troops. And if I can stop him, I definitely will.”

Olik grinned. “All right. I will talk to both of them.”

Yoni took his arm. “To be honest, I don’t want *you* to go, either,” she said. “But I know I don’t have much of a chance of stopping you. And the men need you to lead them. They expect nothing less.”

“And you?” Olik said.

Yoni shrugged and gave him a thin smile. “I guess I will stay here and keep an eye on the nobles.”

Mansur laughed. He filled a goblet with ale. “I don’t think Belcko has the guts to try anything foolish, Yoni. He knows what will happen if he stirs up trouble again. What will happen is that I will personally rip off his balls and feed them to the crows.” He laughed again, then drained his goblet in one long gulp. “By the gods!” he cried as he slammed the empty goblet on the table. “I haven’t felt this good in years!”

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, then slapped Olik on the shoulder. “I can feel it in my guts, Olik. We’re finally going to get Terrek. We’ll make that swine pay for what he did to Mogol.”

Olik nodded. “And for what he did to all the other poor bastards he sent to their graves.”

Mansur clenched his jaw. He refilled his goblet and took another swig. “I’m telling you,” he grunted, “if the last thing I see before I die is Terrek’s head on a pole, I will die a very happy man.”

“Come,” Olik said, resting his hands on his friend’s shoulder. “Let’s get ready.”

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Belcko’s response was as predictable as that of a stone dropped on a steep slope. Although he admitted that Subor had probably saved Persis by attacking Terrek’s army in the rear, he also insisted that Subor had withdrawn when the enemy was ready to collapse. And, he argued, that decision had lengthened the siege by several moons. It was obvious, he

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claimed, that Subor's sole intention had been to prolong the war, not to aid his fellow Attarians. In Belcko's eyes, Subor was therefore still a traitor. And Persis didn't owe the man anything.

When Atrana informed Belcko that an army was already being assembled behind his back, the man was clearly shocked. But he seemed more upset by the fact that he was left out of the decision than by the actual departure of the troops. Although he made quite a display of being offended, he raised no objections. He even agreed, albeit reluctantly, to put Yoni in charge of the Persian guard that would stay behind. His own health was still an issue, he admitted, and as long as Yoni would consult with him on major decisions, he would be more than happy to leave her in charge of the daily affairs.

Belcko's behavior gave Olik second thoughts about their decision to set out for Gulis. The man seemed all too eager to have the soldiers out of the way. Olik couldn't believe that the governor would be foolish enough to consider a coup, and yet....

That night, he woke up sweating. Sudden worry engulfed his mind. He still thought they had made the right decision, but perhaps they had underestimated the dangers involved. Would they gain one city only to lose the other?

The Sign of the Serpent is the final installment of The Revelations Saga. As the prophecy is about to be fulfilled, a sense of terror settles over the kingdom. Will the world of mankind come to an end?

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